Deities of Death

A Visual Compendium of Death Personified

By J. Martin Strangeweather

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Excerpt from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:

"Listen, divine one! During this time, when your mind and body are parting ways, pure reality manifests itself to you as intricate, dazzling visions, vividly experienced, more real than any dream you've ever had, terrifying and worrisome, shimmering like a mirage. Do not fear these horrible manifestations. Do not be frightened. Do not panic. Remain calm. Focus. Remember that your body is part of the hallucination now. The body you are fearing for is only an instinctual mental construct. You are no longer in a material, flesh and blood form. Thus, whatever unsettling sights and sounds may come at you, they cannot hurt you. The part of you which can die is already dead. You are in the state between. Recognize these dreams and hallucinations for what they are."

I strove to channel these spirits faithfully, remaining true to their specific iconographies. I was cautious to summon these dreadful deities with due reverence, respectful of their immortal stories—lessons and warnings and mysteries wallpapering the background of our collective psyche. The tales themselves have not been included. You can find them easily enough on the internet. Articulate depictions, however, are much harder to come by.

DEITIES OF DEATH

Asia

Ahriman, or Angra Mainyu, the Zoroastrian Personification of Death and Evil

Ninazu the Earliest Mesopotamian God of the Underworld

Nergal the Mesopotamian God of War, Death, Disease, and the Underworld

Ereshkigal the Goddess of Kur the Sumerian Underworld

Namtar the Sumerian Herald of Death and Disease

Ningirima the Mesopotamian Goddess of Snakes, Fish, Magic, and the Underworld

Ninkurra (“Lady of the Underworld”) the Mesopotamian Goddess of Death

Lamashtu the Mesopotamian Demon Goddess of Infant Death

Atargatis the Syrian Goddess of Fertility, Death, the Moon, and the Sea

Mot the Canaanite God of Death and the Underworld

Patala (Nagaloka)

Vasuki the King of the Nagas,
Lord of Patala (the lowest of the seven underworlds in Hindu Religion)

Mayasura the Architect of Illusions,
Asura King of the Hindu Underworld Known as Talātala

Mahabali the Demon King of the Hindu Underworld Known as Sutala

Hara-Bhava the Master of Goldmines,
Ruler of the Hindu Underworld Known as Vitala

Bala the Ruler of Atala the First of the Seven Underworlds in Hinduism

Kali the Hindu Goddess of Death and Destruction

Yama the Hindu God of Death,
Judge of the Dead

Chitragupta the Underworld Scribe and Record Keeper in Hinduism

Gorak the Yamaduta
(Yamadutas drag sinful souls to the Hindu underworld of Yamaloka for judgment after death)

Dhumavati the Hindu Goddess of the Void and the Inevitable End of All Things
(also known as the Widow Goddess)

Mṛtyu-māra the Personification of Death and Temptation in Hinduism and Buddhism

Yeomra the Korean God of Death,
Supreme Ruler of the Underworld

Pyeonghwaloun Dalbich (“Peaceful Moonlight”)
the Jeoseung Saja (“Death Angel”) in Korean Lore

The Jug-eum-ui Manyeo (“Death Witch” or “Necromancer”)
of Guryeo (a kingdom in ancient Korea)

Phya Yom the Death King of Naraka the Underworld in Thai Buddhism

The Citipati, or “The Lord and Lady of the Cemetery” in Tibetan Buddhism

Izanami the Queen of Yomi the Shadowy Underworld in Japanese Mythology

Yomotsu-shikome (“The Ugly Woman of the Underworld”)
the Handmaid of the Queen of the Japanese Underworld

Mezu (“Horse Face”) the Guardian of the Japanese Underworld

Gozu (“Ox Head”) the Guardian of the Japanese Underworld

Shinkō-ō the Judge of the First Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Shokō-ō the Judge of the Second Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Sōtei-ō the Judge of the Third Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Gokan-ō (“King of Five Senses”),
Judge of the Fourth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Emma-ō the Judge of the Fifth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell,
Overall Ruler of the Infernal Courts

Henjyō-ō (“King of Change”),
Judge of the Sixth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Taizan-ō the Judge of the Seventh Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Byōdō-ō the Judge of the Eighth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Toshi-ō the Judge of the Ninth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Gotōtenrin-ō the Judge of the Tenth Court of Jigoku the Japanese Hell

Odayakana Kaihō (“Gentle Liberation”)
the Shinigami (“Kami of Death”) in Japanese Culture

Hone-onna (“Bone Woman”) the Yōkai in Japanese Folklore

Takiyasha the Witch Summoning Gashadokuro the Skeleton Specter

Xiwangmu (“Queen Mother of the West”)
the Chinese Goddess of the Peaches of Immortality

King Yan the God of Death,
Overseer of Diyo the Chinese Land of the Dead

Tian the Clockwork Heaven

The Celestial Court of the Clockwork Heaven

Sitan the Lord of Kasanaan the Tagalog Underworld

Hukluban the Bringer of Disease,
Emissary of the Lord of the Tagalog Underworld

Manggagaway the Bringer of Sickness,
Emissary of the Lord of the Tagalog Underworld

Manisilat the Homewrecker,
Emissary of the Lord of the Tagalog Underworld

Mangkukulam the Fire Starter,
Emissary of the Lord of the Tagalog Underworld

Sidapa the Visayan God of Death and Fate,
Seducer of Libulan the Moon God

Ob-obanan (“White Hair”) the Philippine Goddess of the Underworld

Calon Arang the Necromancer in Balinese Folklore

Rangda the Balinese Queen of Demons

Erlik Khan the Turkish and Mongolian God of Death,
Ruler of the Underworld Known as Tamag

Arson-Dulai the God of the Turkish (Yakut) Underworld,
Lord of the One-Eyed, One-Armed, One-Legged Abaasy Demons

Nga the Siberian God of Darkness, Winter, and Death,
Ruler of Yal-mal the Underworld

Africa

Atum the Primordial Creator and Destroyer of the World in Egyptian Mythology

Anubis the Egyptian God of Funerary Rites,
Guide to the Underworld

Kebechet the Chthonic Goddess of Protection and Embalming in Egyptian Mythology

Hathor the Egyptian Sky Goddess and Guide to the Underworld

Kherty the Guide to Duat the Egyptian Underworld

Seker the Egyptian God of Resurrection

Nekhbet the Egyptian Goddess of Childbirth,
Protector of the Dead

Wepwawet the Opener of Ways to Duat the Egyptian Underworld

Nehebkau the Egyptian God of Funerary Rites,
Protector of the Dead

Osiris the Lord of Duat the Egyptian Underworld,
Judge of the Dead

The Egyptian Scales of Justice and Maat's Feather

Maat the Egyptian Goddess of Truth, Morality, Law, and Justice

Ammit the Devourer of the Dead in Egyptian Mythology

Nephthys the Egyptian Goddess of Night, Mourning, and the Dead

Anput the Egyptian Goddess of Funerals and Mummification,
Protector of the Dead

Perit the Underworld Goddess of Renewal and Rebirth in Egyptian Mythology

Amentet the Egyptian Goddess of Necropolises West of the Nile

Isis the Egyptian Goddess of Magic, Fertility, and Healing,
Protector of the Dead

Bastet the Egyptian Goddess of Cats and Fertility,
Protector Against Evil Spirits and Disease,
Guide to the Afterlife

Apophis the Egyptian Personification of Chaos, Darkness, and Death

Settut the Adversary of Humanity, also known as the Witch Queen
and the First Human to Emerge from the Underworld (in Amazigh Mythology)

Ogbunabali the Igbo God of Death and Merciless Justice

Ala the Alusi (“Deity”) of the Earth, Morality, Fertility, and Creativity,
Ruler of Ala-mmọọ the Igbo Underworld

Asase Yaa the Akan Goddess of Barren Lands, Truth, and Peace,
also known as the Mother of the Dead

Amokye the Guardian to the Entrance of Asamando,
the Akan and Ashanti Land of the Dead

Owuo the Akan and Asante God of Death

Walumbe the Ganda Spirit Of Death And Disease

Oya the Orisha of Storms and Death in Yoruba Religion

Ayao the Orisha of Storms and Death in Yoruba Religion,
Assistant of Oya

Yemoja the Orisha of Rivers, Fertility, Motherhood, and Death in Yoruba Religion

Papa Legba the West African Vodun Gatekeeper of the Spirit World,
Intermediary Between God and Humanity

Baron Samedi the Haitian Vodou Lord of Cemeteries,
Guide to the Next World

Maman Brigitte the Haitian Vodou Healer and Protector of Women's Graves, Guide to the Next World

Europe

The Elysian Fields

Hermes the Herald of the Greek Gods,
Guide to Hades the Underworld,
Protector of Shepherds, Travelers, Thieves, Merchants, and Orators

The Splendor of Mount Olympus

Mount Olympus

Charon the Ferryman of the River Styx and Acheron in Greek Mythology

Styx the Greek Underworld Goddess of the Black River of Solemn Oaths

Lethe the Greek Goddess of the Underworld River of Forgetfulness and Oblivion

Phlegethon the Greek God of the Underworld River of Boiling Blood

Cocytus the Greek God of the Underworld River of Lamentation

Acheron the Greek God of the Underworld River of Woe

Cerberus the Guardian of the Entrance to Hades the Greek Underworld

The Three Judges of the Dead in Greek Mythology: Aeacus, Rhadamanthys, and Minos

Enodia the Greek Goddess of Gates, Ghosts, and Cemeteries

Demeter the Greek Goddess of Grains, Harvest, and the Cyclical Seasons
(Mother of Kore)

Kore the Greek Goddess of Spring and Renewal
(after her abduction by Hades, she would be known as Persephone)

Persephone the Greek Queen of the Dead

Hades the Greek God of Death,
Lord of Hades the Underworld

The Palace of Hades

Makaria the Greek Goddess of Blessed Death
(Daughter of Hades and Persephone)

Minthe the Mistress of Hades

Thanatos the Greek God of Peaceful Death

Hypnos the Greek God of Sleep and Peaceful Transitions to the Hereafter

Morpheus the Greek God of Dreams and Visions

Moros the Personification of Impending Doom and Inescapable Fate
in Greek Mythology

Hekate the Greek Goddess of Ghosts, Witchcraft, and the Moon

Lampades the Nymphs of the Underworld,
Minions of Hekate

One-Legged Empusa the Herald of Hekate

Lamia the Devourer of Children in Greek Mythology

Achlys the Mist of Death in Greek Mythology

Melinoë the Chthonic Goddess of Nightmares and Madness in Greek Mythology

Nyx the Mother of Death and Darkness in Greek Mythology

Erebus the God of Darkness and the Underworld in Greek Mythology

The Black Ker, Greek Goddess of Violent Death,
Queen of the Keres

Stygere (“Bitter Doom”) the Ker
(Keres are spirits of violence and death in Greek mythology)

Nosoi (“The Diseased”) the Ker
(Keres are spirits of violence and death in Greek mythology)

Gello the Demoness of Sickness, Miscarriage, and Infant Mortality in Greek Mythology

Alecto (“Endless Anger”) the Fury
(Furies are chthonic goddesses of vengeance in Greek mythology)

Tisiphone (“Vengeful Destruction”) the Fury
(Furies, also known as the Erinyes, are chthonic goddesses of vengeance in Greek mythology)

Megaera (“Jealous Rage”) the Fury
(Furies are chthonic goddesses of vengeance in Greek mythology)

Kronos the Titan Lord of Time in Greek Mythology

Echidna the Chthonic Mother of Monsters in Greek Mythology

Typhon the Chthonic Father of Monsters in Greek Mythology

The Fates (also known as the Moirai and the Weavers of Destiny in Greek Mythology): Lachesis (“The Allotter”), Atropos (“The Unswayable”), and Clotho (“The Spinner”)

The Golden Thread of Life

Pluto the Roman God of Wealth,
Lord of Pluto the Underworld

Dis Pater the Roman God of Wealth and the Underworld

Orcus the Roman God of the Underworld,
Punisher of the Dead

Mors the Roman Personification of Death

Mania the Roman Goddess of the Underworld,
Mother of Ghosts and the Undead

Saturn the Roman God of Time

Erichtho the Thessalian Necromancer

Vanth the Etruscan Guide to the Underworld

Śuri the Etruscan God of Fire and the Underworld

Calu the Etruscan God of Darkness, Death, Fire, and Wolves,
Lord of the Underworld

Charun the Etruscan Guide to the Underworld

Epona the Gallo-Roman Goddess of Fertility,
Protector of Equines,
Guide to the Underworld

Ataegina the Iberian Goddess of Night, Death, and Rebirth,
Queen of the Underworld

Spandaramet the Armenian Goddess of Fertile Soil and Vineyards,
Queen of the Underworld

Effigy of Morana the Slavic Goddess of Death, Winter, and Rebirth

Baba Yaga the Iron-Toothed Forest Mother and Chthonic Spirit of Slavic Folklore

Baba Yaga’s House

Baba Yaga’s House (Battle Version)

Cuma or Kuga (“The Plague”) the Slavic Demon Goddess of Death and Disease

Veles the God of Nature, Water, and the Slavic Underworld Known as Nav

Arawn the Celtic God of the Dead,
Ruler of Annwn the Underworld

Ceridwen the Celtic Goddess of Inspiration, Metamorphosis, and Rebirth

Cailleach the Gaelic Hag Goddess of Storms, Winter, and Death

The Morrígan or the Phantom Queen,
Celtic Goddess of War, Fate, and Death

Clíodhna the Queen of the Banshees in Irish Folklore

Donn the God of the Dead,
Ruler of Tech Duinn the Irish Underworld

Rán the Norse Goddess of Storms and Death by Drowning

Garm the Guardian to the Entrance of Hel the Norse Underworld

Hel the Norse Goddess of Death and the Underworld

Brynhilde (“Battle Maiden") the Valkyrie (“Choosers of the Slain” in Norse Mythology)

Kára (“Storm Rider”) the Valkyrie (“Choosers of the Slain” in Norse Mythology)

Asgard

Hrist (“The Thunderer”) the Valkyrie (“Choosers of the Slain” in Norse Mythology)

Göndul (“The Battle Seer”) the Valkyrie (“Choosers of the Slain” in Norse Mythology)

Freyja the Norse Goddess of Love, War, Magic, and Death,
Queen of the Valkyries,
Ruler of the Heavenly Field of Fólkvangr

Odin the Norse God of Wisdom, War, Magic, and Death,
Ruler of Asgard

Huginn (“Thought”) and Muninn (“Memory”)
the Messengers and Scouts of Odin in Norse Mythology

Valhalla

Iðunn the Norse Goddess of Rejuvenation,
Keeper of the Golden Apples of Immortality

Móðguðr the Guardian of the Gjöll Bridge to the Underworld in Norse Mythology

Loki the Norse Trickster God Who Brought About Ragnarok (“Twilight of the Gods”)

The Norns (also known as the Norse Goddesses of Fate): Verdandi, Urd, and Skuld

Yggdrasil the World Tree

Loviatar the Blind Goddess of Death and Disease in Finnish Mythology

Kiputyttö (“Maiden of Pain”) the Goddess of Illness and Suffering in Finnish Mythology

Tuoni the God of Death and Darkness,
Lord of Tuonela the Underworld in Finnish Mythology

Tuonetar the Queen of Tuonela the Underworld in Finnish Mythology

Louhi the Witch Queen of Pohjola (the Underworld in Finnish Mythology)

Hellawes the Necromancer of Arthurian Legend

South America

Vucub-Came the Ruler of K’iche’ the Maya Underworld

Hun-Came the Maya God of Death

Xbaquiyalo the Lady of Xibalba (the Maya Underworld)

Cizin (“The Stinking One”) the Maya God of Death and Earthquakes

Ixtab the Maya Goddess of Suicide

Ah Puch the Maya God of Death

Camazotz the Death Bat of the Maya Underworld

Supay the God of Death,
Ruler of Ukhu Pacha the Underworld of the Inca

Vichama the Inca God of Death, Vengeance, and the Creation of Present-Day Humans

Mictlāntēcutli the Aztec God of Death,
King of the Underworld Known as Mictlān

Mictēcacihuātl the Aztec Lady of the Dead

Ītzpāpalōtl ("Obsidian Butterfly") the Aztec Goddess of Death,
Ruler of Tamōhuānchān the Underworld Paradise for Dead Infants

Cihuateteo the Aztec Spirits of Women Who Died During Childbirth

The Great Spider Goddess of Teotihuacan (Aztec Goddess of Death)

Cōātlīcue the Aztec Goddess of Nature, Fertility, and Death

Xolotl the Aztec Guide to the Afterlife

Tlaltecuhtli the Death Dealer in Aztec Mythology

Santa Muerte the Mexican Personification of Death,
Guide to the Afterlife

North America

Sedna the Goddess of the Sea,
Ruler of Adlivun the Inuit Underworld

Spider Grandmother the Goddess of Creation Who Led the First Humans
Out of the Underworld (in Hopi and Navajo Lore)

Animikii the Thunderbird of Ojibwe Lore

Wakiya the Thunderbird of Lakota Lore

Hé-no the Thunderbird of Iroquois Lore

Tahquitz the First Shaman in Cahuilla Lore
(he eventually became a powerful spirit of death)

Muut the Cahuilla Messenger of Death

Mishipeshu the Underwater Panther of the Algonquin Underworld

The Emerald Maiden of the North Sea,
Guide to Fiddler’s Green the Afterlife for Sailors

Oceania

Milu the Hawaiian God of Death,
Ruler of Lua-o-Milu the Hawaiian Underworld

Kanaloa the Hawaiian God of the Ocean,
Ruler of the Hawaiian Underworld Known as Pō

Aumakua in Bird Form
(Shapeshifting Hawaiian Guide to the Underworld)

Hine-nui-te-pō the Māori Goddess of Death and the Night,
Ruler of Rarohenga the Underworld

Aiaru the Tahitian Goddess of Death and Fate,
Guardian of the Ocean Depths

Havea Hikule‘o the Goddess of Pulotu the Tongan Underworld

Saveasi‘uleo the Eel God of Pulotu the Samoan Underworld

Degei the Creator of the World and the Judge of the Dead in Fijian Mythology

Mokoi the Australian Aboriginal Spirit of Death and Disease

Narahdarn the Australian Aboriginal Messenger of Death

Miscellaneous

The White Horseman of the Apocalypse

The Red Horseman of the Apocalypse

The Black Horseman of the Apocalypse

The Pale Horseman of the Apocalypse

Azrael the Angel of Death in Judaic, Islamic, and Christian Traditions

The Avatar of Mr. Strangeweather,
Modern-Day Guide to the Eidetic Afterlife

Meditation on Death

Today I will acknowledge that I am
the personification of Death.

I am blood red
and bloodless pale,
sickly yellow,
purple and blue as dusky twilight,
shrouded in blackest mystery.

My touch is the cold of a dying cosmos,
numb as paralysis,
reeking of Life recycling its fundamentals,
or *reincarnating*, if you prefer.

I speak through the gurgling whisper
of deathbed confessions
and the last rites of Catholicism,
screeching Aztec death whistles,
the brassy trombones and trumpets
of a New Orleans jazz funeral procession,
taiko drums thundering
throughout the Japanese Obon festival,
the deep resonance of didgeridoo
during Aboriginal Australian
"hollow log coffin" ceremonies,
Irish keening like a banshee wail,
Tibetan Bardo prayers and Seneca burial chants,
the overexaggerated moans
of professional Chinese mourners,
fluent in all the languages of grief.

Death speaks plain truth
no honest ear can stand to hear.

I am the giver of dreams and visions,
peaceful slumber,
the calm after the storm.

Though your passage may be turbulent,
Death is gentle as a liquid butterfly in chrysalis.

Death is not here to cause you pain,
but to end your suffering.

Death never comes to conquer;
Death is only a guide.

Death is not violent or murderous,
to think otherwise is to confuse it for Life.

Death's real name is mystery,
which is another name for God.

On one side of the coin is Life,
with Death on the other.
You are the currency of miracles,
and Fate has tossed you freely.

Death's Role

We all begin Life
in a deathless state of immortality,
at least mentally.

Death was your first exposure to eternity.
To deny Death is to deny the fullness of Life.

Death is the great inspirer,
the ultimate motivator.

Striving for immortality
only comes from the knowledge Death bestows.

Death builds civilizations and founds religions,
invents medicine, machinery, and science.

Death lurks behind every act of creation:
every artwork, every novel, every song,
every newborn.

All societies are structured unaware
around the denial and repression of Death.

Death is the most ancient of deities
too frightful to worship or even acknowledge
in these gentler modern times.

Death is neither a judge nor a judgment;
Death is a teacher.

Death will dispel the illusion,
but won't set you free.

With the acceptance that Life is fleeting and Death might be forever,
existence takes on new meaning, new splendor,
new purpose.

Death is your best friend
and your worst enemy.

Death does not take sides
or play favorites.

Death ensures equality
among all living things.

Mortals and Mortality

Humans misunderstand Death,
so they fashion gods and spirits
to save them from futility and meaninglessness,
becoming enslaved by their own fears.

Death is a system of symbols and rituals
that vary from person to person and culture to culture
and generation to generation.

The obsessive avoidance of Death
becomes the neurotic avoidance of Life.

The false prophet of Death
looks at the lavish feast set out before him
and sees only dung.

Death wants you to live joyously,
flooded with awareness that every breath is a miracle,
but your ancestors birthed you into cages of neurosis
built from their greed and prejudice.

History is a series of shortsighted decisions
with long-term consequences.

Languages too may die,
along with whole systems of belief.
The greatest empires fall in flames like autumn leaves.
Civilizations come and go like crashing waves.
History itself periodically succumbs to oblivion.

The ultimate and foundational dilemma of human existence
is that we are mortal creatures who
are hyper-aware of our mortality,
and to make matters worse,
we are possessed of minds that glimpse eternity.

Even if you live for a thousand years,
Death will never leave you,
in fact, such long stretches of time
will surely make your relationship all the more
drastic and neurotic.

The healthiest way to circumvent the dread of Death
is to live your span of days as fully as you can,

as honestly as you can,
so that looking back involves few regrets
(though possibly many failures, but the two are different)
and looking forward involves the prospect of some new adventure,
even at Death's door.

Only illusory worldviews can temporarily cure humans
of the existential dread at their core.
Question: What is the healthiest illusory worldview?
Answer: Whichever provides the most freedom, dignity, and hope.

If miracles are to occur,
we must start believing in them again.

The ancient human ideal
was an immortalized hero who
worshipped the power of deities
and strove to conquer the monstrous forces of nature.

The contemporary human ideal
is an awe-filled artist or craftsman who worships mystery
and strives to live in harmony with the rest of Creation.

No Life is ever wasted;
your numbered days are pages
in the ongoing story of humanity.

And all of humanity is but a chapter
in the grand cosmic tale.

You were born from the alchemy of stars,
and stars are mortal, too.

Even the universe is mortal,
slowly dying as it expands into a uniformity
of frozen dust drifting through total darkness.

But who's to say a universe cannot birth other universes,
or reincarnate anew?

The Meaning of Life

Sooner or later,
everyone asks, “What is the meaning of Life?”
The theist concludes, “To find salvation,”
to which the atheist scoffs.
The atheist concludes, “Life is inherently meaningless,”
to which the theist scoffs.
But there is another answer they may both agree on…

The universe exploded forth from a seedling state
and continues expanding to this day,
according to the current theories.
You too exploded forth from a seedling state,
so to speak,
and expanded within your mother’s womb
until you exploded forth again,
so to speak,
and began growing into adulthood,
all the while your mind was expanding,
accumulating knowledge and
learning the ways of your culture.
Drop a single tiny seed of grass into moist earth
and watch how it grows and multiplies,
expanding rhizomatically into verdant fields
stretching as far as resources will allow.

Whatever lies beyond the edge of the universe
is a mystery.
All knowledge ends in mystery.

The fool sees everything as a mystery,
and so does the wisest philosopher.

Every iota of mystery that Life expands into
becomes sustenance for further expansion.

Thus, the meaning of Life is to expand in every possible way—
physically, mentally, spiritually, experientially, cosmically,
and materially.

This answer is certainly more hopeful
than the hackneyed view that Life is meaningless,
and it's certainly more sensible
than kowtowing to deified reflections
of your insecurities.

The Hour of Death

"Es hora de volver a casa," said Death,
standing on the corner of Fourth and Broadway,
staring into an elderly flower vender's bright pinpoint pupils,
taking the bouquet of roses from her trembling hands.

She had eyes of bloodshot sparkle,
spit-puddle eyes pooled in crater sockets
with translucent lids stretched taut as twilight,
urgent eyes,
full of hurt and the secret to equanimity in extremis,
measuring the world from a grave's perspective,
which isn't to say a standpoint of morbidity or negativity—
looking upon the equality Death promises,
the unity,
all the laughable prides soon laid low,
seeing everyone and everything as an equal opportunity
to earn a few pesos;
uncouth eyes that stared too long,
witnessed loved ones born and loved ones die,
witnessed villages swallowed by concrete,
witnessed the white man's wrath drop from heaven
onto Nagasaki and Hiroshima,
the invention of media wars
fought with witch-hunting words
over differences between red stars and white stars,
witnessed the offspring of good Christians
convert to worshipping the image of strangers
playing make-believe on big screens in theatres
that felt like cathedrals,
witnessing quinceañeras and betrayals
and crop failures and mass executions,
losses that would have broken a gentrified spirit
a hundred times over,
the passing of one century into another,
witnessing unto God,
overflowing with prayer.

This is what Death saw in her eyes,
the strength to find peace
in the midst of this omnipresent explosion
called cosmos.

The Spouse of Death

Who are you grieving for?
Not the dead;
they do not suffer.

You grieve for the loss
of yourself,
at least a piece of yourself,
like a missing arm or leg,
or a cherished neighborhood of your heart.

Grief doesn't have an expiration date.
If I lost just the tip of a pinky finger,
I would be reminded every day
of its absence
for the rest of my days.

But grief lessens in severity
over time,
just like any wound,
and sometimes it's easier to love someone
once they're gone.

Cry until you run out of tears.
It's okay
not to be okay.

Memento Mori

Of course you're fearful of Death.
Death is scary.
But I'll let you in on a secret:
The best way to confront Death
is to really live Life.

Let's say you're a child
(you are, cosmically speaking)
and you find yourself at Disneyland.
Some people will say
you'll come back to Disneyland many times.
Others will say this is your one and only time at Disneyland.
You don't really know.
After all, you're just a child.

If you find yourself parented
by timid souls at the amusement park,
they will inhibit you at every turn:
"That looks delicious!" you'll say. "Let's eat there!"
And they will respond, "That place is expensive.
Everything here is overpriced.
Wait till you get home and I'll make you something."
"That ride looks fun!" you'll say. "Can we go on it?"
And they will respond, "Oh, that one's too fast.
It'll make you nauseous," and
"That one's too scary for you. It'll give you nightmares."
And when you point to another alluring ride,
they will say, "Oh, the line is too long."
They will tell you
"not that one, it's for grownups" for one ride,
and then say for another "you're too old for that one."
When it's finally time to leave the amusement park,
all you can do is look back with regrets
as you walk out the gates.
You didn't go on enough rides.
You didn't get to try the chocolate-covered marshmallow brownie
in the shape of Mickey Mouse that you really wanted to try
because you were told it was too unhealthy,
too expensive,
and the line was too long.
You didn't experience enough,
and now the prospect of exiting the gates is traumatizing.

In an alternate scenario,
you find yourself parented by bolder souls.
They encourage you
to experience more of the amusement park, not less.
When you say, “That looks tasty, but I bet it’s expensive,”
they say, “Come on, you only live once.
This might be the only chance you ever get to try it.”
And when you say, “I don’t know
if we should go on that ride. It looks awfully fast,”
they say, “Come on, you only live once.”
And when you say, “That ride looks fun,
but the line is too long,”
they say, “Come on, you only live once.”
When it’s finally time to leave the park,
you have no regrets.
You’re talking excitedly
about all the rides you went on—
the fun ones, the scary ones,
the ones that made you feel a little nauseous,
and you’re trying to remember everything,
but there’s just so much.
You don’t want to exit the gates
(no one wants to)
but as you do
you’re feeling at ease with the overall experience,
which makes exiting less difficult.
In fact, you’ve done so much
that you’re tuckered out and ready to go home
for a nice long rest.

But yes, Death is frightening,
as it should be,
to remind you,
to warn you,
Life is ebbing
even as you read these words.

Look for Death in everything you see—
in the very act of seeing.

Death has endless names and guises…

Cities of the Dead

The funeral ghats along the banks of the Ganges
burn approximately 80 tons of firewood every day,
releasing 44,000 tons of carbon dioxide
into the atmosphere every year.

Modern cremation techniques release about 420 pounds
of carbon dioxide per body
into the air we all share.

It's unsettling for Hollywoodized minds
to see any signs of decay in the dead,
so we drain them of all blood
and fill them with toxic chemicals,
our vanity outliving us.

More than 4 million gallons of embalming fluid
are buried in healthy-looking corpses every year,
deadening the surrounding soil
and poisoning the groundwater with our denial.

The largest cemetery in the United States
is Rose Hills Memorial Park and Mortuary,
covering 1,400 acres.
The catacombs beneath Paris
span over 300 kilometers.
The Odessa Catacombs in Ukraine
span over 2,500 kilometers.

If we don't change the ways
we separate dust from dreams,
someday the planet will be covered in cemeteries,
one vast necropolis
with no room left for the living.

If you think outside the coffin,
donated parts of you can continue living
in other bodies,

or you can turn yourself into a lab-grown diamond,
flaunting your beauty and inherent worth forever.
Gifting your weighted body to the sea
is the most eco-friendly,
but a long-term strategy would be to let nature
recycle you into nutrient-rich compost,
healing the land
rather than causing more harm to Eden.
Become one with a tree
instead of chopping one down
to serve as your casket.
Reincarnate as a community of mushrooms
in a biodegradable shroud made of fungal spores,
or simply let the vultures pick your bones clean.

After all you have taken,
will you give nothing back?

J. Martin Strangeweather is one of the world's foremost authorities on death and dying. Holding degrees in philosophy, rhetoric, and art history, he draws on extensive studies across historical, theological, philosophical, anthropological, psychological, medical, and scientific literature concerned with aging, death, near-death experiences, end-of-life care, the grieving process, and funerary practices around the globe. As the originator of the eidetic afterlife hypothesis, he has been described as a modern-day psychopomp. A psychopomp, in classical mythology and spirituality, is any figure who guides souls to the land of the dead. By detailing the psychological, phenomenological, and neurophysiological mechanics underlying such near-death phenomena as temporal dilation, out-of-body experiences, panoramic life reviews, reunions with the deceased, feelings of universal oneness, and encounters with divine light, the eidetic afterlife hypothesis effectively maps out the mysterious experience of dying. Strangeweather's lifelong pursuit of thanatological knowledge has taken him to the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, the Potala Palace in Tibet, Machu Picchu in Peru, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Mount Uluru in Australia, the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, Stonehenge in England on Mayday, the bone-lined catacombs beneath Paris, France, the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, Jerusalem in Israel, and the burning ghats along the Ganges River in Varanasi, India, as well as U.C. Irvine's Willed Body Donor Program morgue and crematorium, where he studied contemporary funerary practices firsthand.